

Race subjugation and *The God of Small Things*: A critical reappraisal

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ABSTRACT The making of the myth of superior race and inferior race has no scientific basis. Still historians down the ages have tried to prove such 'hoax' with manufactured facts. Such pillars of race prejudice have resulted in the creation of hatred, disbelief and dishonor of humanity. Arundhati Roy has rightly addressed this dark area to show our so called narrative of 'progressive idea' is not that progressive.

KEYWORDS : .Arundhati Roy, race, prejudice

INTRODUCTION

The term race as used in common parlance is devoid of a definite connotation. Thus we speak of the 'human race' which stands for an entire species. Then, we hear about martial and non – martial races as if the ability to fight were inborn, not acquired. There are people who make no difference between race and nation. So the Finns, who belong to the same stock as Swedes, are called a race. Culturally homogeneous groups and people living for generations in a country are also called a race (e.g. the English, the French, the Chinese).

Scientists dismiss such use of the term and proceed to use it in zoological sense. A race is 'distinguished by physical markings' according to them. Though that seems clear enough, diverse schemes of classification of races demonstrate their lack of clarity. Linnaeus and Cuvier divided the human group into three races. Blumen Back classified it into five races. Haeckel established twelve races in 1873, but increased the number to thirty four in 1878. Denniker found thirteen races and thirty sub – races. Sir Arthur Kieth attached utmost importance to colour and divided the races into four – white, yellow, brown and black. Validity of selecting one or a few traits to sub – divide the human species has been challenged by well – known scientists not less than four decades ago. Eleven authors in *The Concept of Race* published in 1964 and edited by Ashley Montagu argued against racial classification. Stephen J Gould, eminent biologist of the twentieth century found it 'not only inconvenient, but also downright misleading, to impose a formal nomenclature on the dynamic patterns of variability that we observe in nature'. Thus even the use of the term in the so called zoological sense is no longer deemed acceptable to science.

Political expediency, however, keeps the notion of race alive. Politicians create and perpetuate things they need and as Stephen J. Gould put it in *The Mismeasure of Man*, 'ideas can be agents and bombs'. Nietzsche was speaking bluntly for a sort of politicians when he declared: 'the falseness of an opinion is for us no objection to it and we are fundamentally inclined to maintain that the falsest opinions are the most indispensable to us.' When a group of people wants to subjugate, exploit and oppress the other one, it proceeds to demonstrate its own superiority. It justifies its domination in the name of a historical mission to civilize the pagans and the barbarians. If there are people audacious enough to denounce it, it does not hesitate to rewrite the history of ancient civilizations to 'prove' that other people have done no better in the past. Slaveholders in America needed the idea of race superiority, the Nazis in Germany played it up to carry on the genocide of six million Jews, it provided excuse for apartheid in Rhodesia and South Africa and it serves the interests of capitalism in Europe and America to this day.

The theory of the white supremacy found its first systematic expression in Count Gobineau's *The Inequality of Human Races* (1853). Gobineau, a minor official in the French diplomatic service was embittered as he was never promoted to a position of importance. A curious mixture of frustrated nobleman and romantic intellectual, he feared the middle and lower class French who carried the taint of inferior and were infecting the French aristocracy, which he claimed was descended from Nordic Aryans. Nietzsche's idea of superman formulated in *Beyond Good and Evil* which disregards moral considerations provided much zeal to the theorists who followed him. Houston Stewart Chamberlain in his *Foundation of Nineteenth*

Century (published in German in 1899 and in English in 1911) and Alfred Rosenberg in his *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (1930) added fanatic anti – semiticism to the above – mentioned ideas. The 845 page tract *The Bell Curve* (1994) by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray contains the American contribution to the campaign of race hatred. *Mankind Quarterly* bankrolled by the New York based Pioneer Fund is a reminder of the fact that Nazism is not a phenomenon of the past.

The theories of white supremacy did not come like a bolt from the blue. They were a by product of the political and economic domination of Asia and Africa by the Europeans, a process completed by them during the eighteenth century if not earlier. It was possible before the late classical Greece had been profoundly influenced by Asian and African cultures. Such ideas were deemed dangerous and expunged systematically later on. Now everything remarkable found in the East was declared to be borrowed from Greece or Rome by the Western orientalisists. Without belittling the role of the East in the progress of civilization, the white rulers could not prove that the non – white had been never better and could not become enlightened without the mercy of their rulers.

To what extent they could go is best illustrated by the hoax of 'Piltdown Man'. Some English paleoanthropologists proceeded to prove that even 'if man were descended from ape, at least the earliest English man was blessed with a brain remarkably larger than any other skulls unearthed in archaeological research. This 'scientific truth' endured for forty years until the Piltdown skull was proved to be a hoax involving a modern human cranium attached to the jaw of an orangutan.

As the English became the masters of vast expanses in Asia and Africa, their own past was forgotten. 'Cicero asked Atticus in the first century B.C. not to obtain slaves from Britain, because they were so stupid and so utterly incapable of being taught that they could not be taken as part of any household of Athens'. But their progeny became audacious enough to pronounce judgement on things they knew as well as on things they did not know. Thus, *Cambridge History of India* (Vol. VI) has to admit that T.B. Macaulay 'poured scorn on oriental literature, of which he knew nothing'. Seeking to create a section of people 'Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect', he laid the foundation of the education policy of India in 1835. That policy has produced many who dare not think and judge for themselves and accept anything without any hesitation on the authority of the white. Brain washing for generations has left many who believed in the superiority of the English and like to imitate them while rating everything Indian as low and unworthy. Such attitudes have not gone away with the departure of the English in 1947.

The God of Small Things gives some glimpses of such attitudes at times. Thus, we find that Rahel was 'blacklisted in Nazareth Convent at the age of eleven, when she was caught outside her headmistress' garden gate decorating a knob of fresh cow dung with small flowers'. It was denounced as a case of depravity at the Assembly next morning. A well – informed critic, Promod K. Nayar says such decoration is related to Onam festival. So the behavior of the Headmistress shows either her utter ignorance of or total disregard for the culture of Kerala. The zealous promoters of the culture of the dominating race need not know or respect the culture of the dominated. So it is not surprising

even in the least that Miss Mitten, the Australian missionary who has come to save the souls of the people of Kerala does not know the name of the language they speak.

The novel shows that it is not only the Syrian Christians in Kerala who are so much attached to the West, even people professing to be communists are in no way different. Comrade Pillai makes his son memorize and recite Mark Antony's speech in Julius Caesar at a tender age while her niece, Latha, recites the poem *Lochinvar*. It is hardly a case of choosing things for oneself and appreciating it for literary merit. It is a deliberate attempt to become somewhat close to the dominant race. Comrade Pillai deems it the greatest achievement of Rahel that she married an American (a white man) and was living in America. He feels proud of his son Lenin (renamed P. Lenin) as he shows his photograph in which he is seen shaking hands with German First Secretary. Indeed a great privilege for the son of a man who claims to be a communist.

Pappachi in the novel represents the Anglicised and Anglophiles who imitate the English in a senseless way. He was Imperial Entomologist at Pusa Institute but his designation was changed to Joint Director, Entomology after independence. He moved to Ayemenem after retirement and tried to create an exotic and outlandish little England there. He bought sky blue Plymouth from an English man. Nobody was allowed to use or step into his car. He became a familiar sight in Ayemenem, coasting down the narrow road in his wide car, looking outwardly elegant but sweating freely inside his woolen suits. He wore a well – pressed three piece suit and his gold pocket watch until he died.

Boundless was Pappachi's faith in the morals of the race that had ruled India for about two centuries. As a matter of fact, Mr. Hollick, the manager of the tea garden under whom Ammu's husband served, wanted to take the advantage of his alcoholic and negligent assistant. He had suggested him to go to a clinic for sometime and send his wife to Hollick's bungalow to be 'looked after'. As Ammu could not harbor such a nasty suggestion, she had to leave her husband. But her father did not believe her story 'not because he thought well of her husband, but simply because he didn't believe that an Englishman, any English man, would covet another man's wife.

Significance of race factor is also seen in the lives of Pappachi's son and daughter. Chacko, his son is praised by all as he had been a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford but what is never mentioned is the fact that he did badly at his examinations, lost his scholarship and had to return under far from flattering circumstances. His only achievement at Oxford was his marriage with Margaret, a waitress at a café. Margaret's father did not attend the marriage as he disliked Indians as 'sly, dishonest people. Chacko did not care to inform his parents about the marriage, his mother learnt about it only when he fell badly in need of money. Chacko got a divorce soon after that and had to return to India.

Even after the divorce, Chacko keeps the wedding picture on his bedside table and invites Margaret to spend Christmas with his family. About a week is spent in elaborate preparation to receive his ex – wife and daughter. Mammachi, Chacko's mother keeps on trying recipes from the book given to her by Chacko. The family leaves no stone unturned to observe all the formalities and give them a warm welcome.

Pappachi's daughter, like his son, is also divorced. When she informed her parents she had decided to marry a Bengali Hindu, they did not care to reply. When she returned after divorce, she found herself unwanted. Her family recognized and provided for 'man's needs' of her brother but she was punished heavily along with her children when she loved Velutha. We wonder if the persons around her would have reacted that way had she married or loved a white man.

The race factor plays a role in the treatment of the children as well. Sophie Mol, the daughter of a white mother is received warmly by everybody at Ayemenem. Even before they met her, they behaved as though they already knew her. They cared for what she would like and what she would think. When they met her, they praised her profusely. She was a 'little angel' to them. On the other hand, Ammu's twins were denounced as 'little demons' sly, uncouth and deceitful. When an accident cut short Sophie Mol's life, the twins were held responsible for it and ruined.

Ammu's is the only voice of dissent amid the Anglophile lot that gives some relief to readers. She calls her father a CCP which is short for

Chhi – Chhi – Poach which means shit – wiper in Hindi. Ammu does not share the illusions of her mother that going to Oxford or marrying a white woman has made Chacko an extra ordinary man. Subsequent developments prove her right. Chacko cheats his mother by making the pickle factory his own and destroys the lives of her sister and her children. Margaret is honest and considerate enough to apologize for slapping Estha in a fit of anger after Sophie Mol's death but Chacko is never ashamed of his deeds. Indeed he despises his own kith and kin more than any body else in the world and deserved to be included among those who 'adore our conquerors and despise ourselves'.

CONCLUSION

The God of Small Things, thus critically initiates the discussion of race subjugation which is strongly existent in post independent Indian society. The legacy of the culture of the dominant group still prevails in India. Even the so called 'progressive' state, Kerala cannot present any bright picture in this regard. The binary of the dominant and dominated is nothing but a traditional burden of white and black myth. Arundhati Roy is sharp enough in this respect to present before us the realistic scenario of our era where 'race' still seems heavier than humanity.

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